

American Armor in Albania, A Soldier's Mosaic

by Lieutenant Colonel Peter W. Rose II

As this issue was going to press, there were reports that TF Hawk would redeploy to Macedonia to support a settlement in Kosovo. — Ed.

Rinas Airfield, Tirana, Albania — Go anywhere in the world the U.S. Army has troops and you are likely to find specially tailored task forces at work. That is no surprise to a soldier of a globally projected Army. Armor and Cavalry units in the Balkans? Nothing new there. The Bosnia mission is a familiar one, so is duty in Macedonia. So what's new?

Well, there's American armor in Albania.

This is going to be a good news story, because what is happening here is good news. I chose to write to let you know there are thousands of success stories daily — soldiers, NCOs and officers making it happen. Sometimes the situation hasn't been perfect, but what is important is how soldiers and their leadership tackled challenges and continue to do so.

I arrived in time to deal with the last of the mud. I worked with others to make the mud go away before wooden tent floors arrived. I filled and humped a soldier's share of sandbags too. Dwell on that and you will miss what has really happened and continues to unfold. There have been thousands of small victories, and there will be thousands more.

If you want to know about the handful of mishaps, most well beyond the control of the leadership here, go and read the recent column by COL (Retired) David Hackworth, who printed apparently verbatim the gripes of a disgruntled soldier here. You will read about being deployed to a mud hole, confusion upon landing, being detoured around the command group to get to the latrine, and other gripes meant to suggest leadership was broken here. The column portrays, amplifies, and distorts the very rare "exception." I'll give you the rule, and I'll use the words of as many soldiers as I can.



Charlie 33 pulls security along the berm at the east side of the TF Hawk perimeter. C Company, 1-35 Armor, is part of TF 1-6 IN at the airport base near Tirana, Albania.

I'll do my best to represent the troops I know best and love — soldiers forged with the thunderbolt. I have done my best to piece together a mosaic of feelings, ideas and observations that belong to our soldiers and express what its like to be here in Albania.

Since I'm on a solid soapbox, I hope this article finds it way to you, Colonel (Retired) Hackworth. Many here are disappointed that your article published the complaints of a whiner. All you have to do is come to see what has been done to take care of soldiers. We would all like the PX to be operational, and all the tents to have floors before the first soldier arrives, but it doesn't work that way. Sir, you should have checked it out.

I want the leader who is ultimately responsible for every American life here to have the clearest head possible, and if a couple of pieces of plywood help give him fifteen minutes more quiet time to make decisions, then send him everything Georgia-Pacific can clear cut. Okay, that is off my chest; now let's talk about what has been going on here, in Albania.

I deployed here this spring with a Training and Doctrine Command Lessons Learned Team. Here, in the southeastern corner of the Balkans, I found a rather unique Army task force, Task Force Hawk, which stood poised and ready to strike, secure, or support as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe required. The

task force was built around Apache helicopters and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) artillery. I moved around the task force assembly area, Camp Reichert, and saw forces that might surprise. Tankers and scouts, part of a "heavy" task force, serving as an integral part of Task Force Hawk's force protection team. This "cold war anachronism" gave the task force commander the ability to conduct limited offensive or defensive operations at a time when the situation was not very clear.

The tanks and crews I saw belonged to Company C, 1st Battalion, 35th Armor, "Conquerors." The company's parent unit for this operation was Task Force 1-6 (TF 1-6), an infantry-heavy task force that included the headquarters and headquarters company and two mechanized infantry companies of 1st Battalion, Sixth Infantry, a rifle company from the 2d Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and "Charlie Tank." TF 1-6 was further augmented by the scout platoon of 1-35 Armor.

Charlie Company's commander, Captain Steve Lutsky, deployed from Baumholder, Germany, explained that there were several facets to the infantry battalion task force mission that also fell within the capabilities and mission of a combined arms team. April and May found the task force focused on force protection. The tank company was task-organized into a tank-heavy company team, swap-



Above, even after weeks of dry weather, there is some mud parking still available.

At left, the TF HAWK Welcome Center, where each new soldier assigned passes through for a briefing prior to linking up with his unit.

ping out one of its tank platoons for a mechanized infantry platoon. CPT Lutsky said his company team was here to provide an armor punch to any and all operations. "We can secure, surveil, defend, attack, and move to block, ensuring uninterrupted operations by Task Force Hawk units operating in and around the Tirana — Rinas Airfield." Naysayers might accuse CPT Lutsky of being overly biased towards the employment of armor. Nope, that wasn't the case. The factors of METT-TC (mission, enemy, troops, terrain — time and civil) were different here, but the principles of employing armor had significant utility. Summing up comments by the battalion task force commander, LTC Jim Embrey, Charlie Company was an essential part of his team.

CPT Lutsky said his fourteen tanks, their command and control and support had deployed by C-17 Globemasters. "We were given three weeks notice. We used two weeks to prepare and move to Ramstein Air Force Base, and deployed a week later."

Deploying by C-17 was just one more first for the 35th Armor Regiment. U.S. Army Europe units are used to deploying by rail and sea. Air deployment was not a mission essential task for many heavy units stationed in Germany. Charlie Company didn't accomplish this feat alone: there was great support from the parent battalion, which also deployed its scout platoon to Albania.

I was eager to hear what the troops would have to say, and wondered what had made the strongest impressions on them. Many readers will probably remember reading about the conditions Task Force Hawk found itself in during the early days. Rain and mud were not

shortage commodities for this military enclave north of Tirana, and I expected that to be the strongest impression, but I was only partly correct.

Sergeant First Class Randall Sumner, a Tennessean who serves as platoon sergeant for 3d Platoon, explained how the company team was able to remain agile. It was in great part due to the unit's preparation, he said: "Company training included mission-oriented classes covering defense, observation posts, tactical road marches and movement, hand and arm signals, occupation of hasty and deliberate positions, sketch cards, quartering parties, assembly area procedures." The list went on to include individual and crew duties, boresighting, prep-to-fire checks, and crew level (tank) maintenance.

SFC Sumner credited the unit's preparatory training at home station, including force protection, taking and securing prisoners, base camp operations, media awareness, and time on the UCOFT (Unit Conduct of Fire Trainers). The company showed its Bosnia experience through buddy equipment checks, weapons security and good field hygiene. SFC Sumner shared his platoon's excitement. There was even a good chance his platoon would get a chance to shoot, maybe sooner than later. Task Force Hawk had developed plans to build and operate live-fire ranges for tank gunnery and small arms marksmanship. The company goal was to shoot tank tables four to eight, or at least modified tables five and six.

SSG John Demey said he would always remember setting up the perimeter security, the process of building and occupying towers, establishing, coordinating and recording fields of observation and fire. There was a great deal of work involved

in getting the berms built, ammo working, and building vehicle fighting positions. What else? "The mud, he grinned." His platoon hadn't gotten a tank stuck, he said, but a soldier had sunk past knee-deep, requiring three of his buddies to extract him.

Specialist Anthony Housey, a tank driver, said "tank wise," the units were somewhat limited in where the tanks could go in and around the assembly area and airfield. When not on the perimeter with their tanks, these armor crewmen could have been mistaken for military police, engineers, or even infantry. Multi-functional soldiers were in high demand and SPC Housey would proudly remember how his company answered the call.

This was a first deployment for Specialist Jeremy Freeman, a tank loader. I wondered how the comments from a soldier unbiased by other deployments might differ. First, his loader's machine gun could be his weapon of choice over a loaded 120mm tank cannon. SPC Freeman was also adapting to a different set of employment factors. Five hundred meters was a pretty long distance in some cases. Finally — and it was coming out again — tankers made pretty darn good dismounts when more "crunchies" were needed.

Freeman was appreciative of the creature comforts that were materializing. The Army and Air Force Exchange Service had brought in several semi-trailers set up as mobile "shoppettes." His company, when not pulling perimeter security had showers less than two hundred meters away. Chow was good. These were all "morale multipliers."

Continued on Page 50

LETTER FROM ALBANIA

from Page 9

The experience another tank commander, Staff Sergeant Scott Wright, remembered vividly was the landing of the C-17 with his tank and crew on board. When the aircraft wheels touched down and the brakes were applied, the tank seemed to strain to the point of breaking free, but it didn't. SSG Wright also considered the mud a considerable adversary, but he wasn't willing to put it in the category of the worst weather and environment he'd experienced. That memory was reserved for soldiering in one of Fort Drum's worst winters. Albanian mud couldn't compete with that and just as it came, one day it dried up and was gone.

Maintaining morale is always an important subject, especially if it is yours. SFC Sumner reflected on the duty aspect of morale. "Guarding an airfield, so to speak, isn't the most exciting mission a tank unit can perform. But considering that, morale is good." As SPC Housey said, a key ingredient in keeping morale up was the buddy system, watching out for each other, as teams, crews, and platoons. He also appreciated the improvements he had seen in camp life. During the deployment phase, the Task Force Hawk commanding general told his commanders and staff, "Right now, conditions suck, but they won't suck for long." The troops see the camp grow; daily improvements were apparent.

Up to this point, I had been enjoying the company of really great tankers, but I also wanted to visit with some of the troops who were keeping the Mounted Force operating, so I moved on to the tank company's support slice. It was comforting to find the company combat trains, tucked in with the tank company team. It was what Armor doctrine tells you to expect: a maintenance team, log pack, and medics tucked in with the battalion task force. Our troops at Rinas Airfield are definitely at the tip of the spear, and they have to be self-sufficient because there is little in the way of host nation support, which occurs more in spirit and security cooperation than in substance. This is no surprise, considering the economic challenges Albania faces even under normal conditions. Add to that the burden placed on the nation by thousands of Kosovar refugees now in the country.



The battalion task force scouts return to Camp Reichert after a security mission, augmenting the infantry guarding an artillery unit set up on a nearby mountaintop.

Organizational and crew maintenance was humming. In a choice spot where gravel was worth its weight in gold, and true hard stand was something used for fixed wing aircraft and maintenance on a very few lucky "helos," I found the company maintenance team, led by Staff Sergeant Michael Hughes, who gave me sound advice on how to conduct maintenance in truly austere conditions. Step one happens before you depart home station, he said. "Double check your PLL (prescribed load list), review your equipment list. Determine your anticipated demands and requisition those items based on the anticipated demand." SSG Hughes noted he had a lot of help from battalion maintenance. When you are the only American tank company in the country, it is good to come with the right tools.

The senior medic, SGT Raymond Wyrwas, said keeping troops healthy was obviously important to him, and that stressing personal hygiene was keeping his troops healthy, but allergies caused the most irritation. I had never heard of "whooping cough dust," but I had had first hand experience with it here. Thanks to SGT Wyrwas I now knew I had succumbed to Albanian "whooping cough dust." Something had to replace the mud, he said. That something was dust.

The medics doubled up to serve in many other ways. The next time I saw them, they were running the ground traffic control point at the southern runway thresh-

old of the Rinas-Tirana runway. Two days later, SGT Wyrwas was running the company command post and monitoring the eastern half of Task Force Hawk's perimeter security. He was tied in with the 2d Brigade Combat Team command post and things were clicking.

For any visitor walking the perimeter and talking with troops, it is easy to recognize the importance of the missions of this deployed tank company and its task force scouts. Professionalism abounded. A good place to close out the visit was with First Sergeant Stephen Lamb. He credited smooth operations in part to the "smart book" his company had developed to prepare for the deployment. Considerable time and effort went into this book, which guided the company leadership through the process of certification and preparation. Documentation covered training, maintenance, family support, finance, billeting, personnel property, privately owned vehicles. The list went on, covering every possible contingency. The first sergeant related how the company had prepared by conducting tactical training and gunnery, performed maintenance, internalized rules of engagement, and discussed base camp operations. I quickly concluded I would be seeing a great deal more of him as I captured lessons learned from a veteran unit, used to deploying.

The next time I saw 1SG Lamb, he had moved the company team to the extreme east side of the Task Force Hawk assem-



At left, the rugged terrain in the Albanian mountains near Tirana. Above, the Co. C, 1-35 Armor command post at the airfield's west side.

bly area. The company area looked good, the tank crews had vigilantly settled into their security and observation posts, the ready reaction force had rapidly worked up and beat its three-minute requirement to roll from a cold start.

It was now time to find battalion task force scouts, who had just returned from a security mission. The platoon had outposted a Task Force Hawk artillery unit in the northern part of Albania, supplementing infantry-provided security to the mountain-top force. Just two and a half hours before I showed up to meet with these scouts, the platoon had been rolling in the gates of Camp Riechert, the task force assembly area.

Staff Sergeant Stanley Johnson had been in Albania about a month, having transferred from Fort Knox, where he had attended the Scout Leader Proficiency Course. He couldn't say enough about the course and its instructors. Everything the course covered he had executed here in Albania, short of calling for indirect fire.

PFC Geoffrey Gleitz spoke with quiet pride as he listed the tasks his section and platoon had performed: route reconnaissance on all of the roads, in all directions fanning out from the task force assembly area, innumerable route and bridge classifications, many without support, some with attached engineers. SFC Alfonso Hankerson, the scout platoon sergeant, was on his third deployment to the Balkans. His platoon had come out of Bosnia five months earlier and had conducted training at an intense pace until their deployment to Tirana in early April.

I asked SFC Hankerson what he would remember about duty with Task Force Hawk. He spoke about how well the platoon had been prepared for the deployment, without knowing it was coming. He had good seasoned soldiers, that was evident. Even the new arrivals from 5-15 Cavalry, 1st Armor Training Brigade had come ready to be trained to the next level. The platoon was humming.

I closed out my scout platoon visit with 1LT Todd Retchless, the platoon leader, who told me he was impressed with the flexibility and versatility of his 19 Deltas. He reported his soldiers had run non-stop, despite many mission changes, many given short notice. The battalion's intense training plan had paid off. Notified during an external evaluation that Albania would be their next destination, he reflected on the confidence the platoon felt in their final preparation and had proven during execution.

I was also lucky to catch a former commander of Charlie Company, Captain Ken Harvey. He had taken Charlie Company to Bosnia the year before, and had turned the company over to Steve Lutsky in July 1998. CPT Harvey was now commander of HHC, 1-6 Infantry. Yes, he is an Armor officer. He compared duty in Bosnia to Albania. Both included operations that revolved around base camps, and relied on Brown and Root contractors for many services, such as laundry and food service. Task Force Hawk was going through some of the same growing pains the IFOR (NATO Implementation Force) had experienced in the early stages of that operation. The similarities made it easy to fall in on this mission.

As I was completing this article, Charlie Company conducted a change of command. The Army process goes on, even in Albania. CPT Lutsky was returning to Baumholder to assume command of HHC, 1-35 Armor. CPT Marshall Miles was assuming command. Charlie Company received a change in mission and assumed control of securing the east half of TF Hawk's assembly area.

Three days later, as his company prepared for a new operation, CPT Miles shared his feelings about being a part of Task Force Hawk. He saw the assignment as an opportunity to show the world that Armor's utility exceeded many expectations. He was proud of the company and making sure his soldiers understood that when the Army leadership or press

spoke of tanks in Albania they were referring to Charlie Company. CPT Miles noted that being on the tip of the spear you had to be ready to point in several directions and shift rapidly when called on. As we spoke, the company was preparing for potentially its second deployment by C-17 tactical airlift. Armor was closing out the twentieth century by conducting airlifts to participate in real world operations. Up to now this capability had only been tested, demonstrated, verified.

It was a good note to close out my interviews. I don't know what will happen next. Things are fluid as I write this. I can't tell you where Charlie Company will end up or what missions the scouts will have. You will know that by the time this article is published. I do know I've been privileged to be here and see members of the Armor force on a new frontier, preparing for a number of contingencies and executing missions in rapid order. That has been a real reward. My primary duty has been to capture lessons Task Force Hawk's Headquarters is learning. I'll bring those observations back to the Armor Center for review and potential application to the Strike Force concept.

You can find members of the Mounted Combat Arm of Decision serving just about anywhere challenges arise and soldiers are deployed. Just like the rest of the troops in Task Force Hawk, soldiers forged with the thunderbolt are adaptive, innovative, and successful. I am once again reminded that excellence is as close as your motor pool, or in distant places like Tirana, Albania. They are ready to employ stealth, mobility, firepower, shock effect and mounted protection to accomplish the mission.

LTC Peter W. Rose II is assigned to the U.S. Army Armor Center in the Directorate of Force Development, currently attached to HQ, Task Force Hawk, Tirana, Albania.